DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 056 365 EA 003 732

TITLE	Improving School Community Relations.
INSTITUTION	Canadian Education Association, Toronto (Ontario).
PUB DATE	Mar 71
NOTE	37p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Canadian Education Association, 252 Bloor Street, W., Toronto 5, Ontario (Canada) ($2.00)
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS	*Board of Education Role; Citizen Participation; *Information Dissemination; News Letters; *News Media; Parent Participation; Principals; *Public Relations; *School Community Relationship; School Publications
IDENTIFIERS	Canada

ABSTRACT

This booklet prgides a broad outline of some major aspects of a school community relations program. The report attempts to stimulate greater awareness among school officials, trustees, and others of the potential scope of such programs; and to encourage more school boards to initiate activities designed to bring the schools into closer rapport with the communities they serve. Major topics cover (1) the roles of the board, the information officer, and the principal in school community relations; (2) relations with the media; (3) community participation in school affairs; and (4) board publications. (Author/JF)

ED056365

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

Improving

School Community Relations

CANADIAN EDUCATION ASSOCIATION
252 BLOOR ST. W., TORONTO 5, ONT.

PRICE: TWO DOLLARS

1

EA 003 732

1/2

CONTENTS

Foreword 5

The information gap 6

What is a community relations program? .. 8

The board and its officials 11

The information officer 14

Relations with the media 18

Principals and the media 20

Beyond the news 25

Involving the public in school affairs .. 28

Publications 34

Foreword

This booklet is a follow-up to several earlier activities of the Canadian Education Association related to school-community relations, or public relations. The most recent of these was 2-day workshop at Edmonton in September of 1970, which was attended by about 70 representatives of school boards and Departments of Education in all provinces.

This is neither a checklist nor a textbook, but rather a broad outline of some major aspects of a school-community relations program. The intent is to stimulate a greater awareness of the potential scope of such programs among school officials, trustees and others -- and to encourage more school boards to initiate activities designed to bring the schools into closer rapport with the communities they serve.

In most articles or booklets on educational public relations, the matter of internal staff communication is included for convenience under the "public relations" heading. However, since the objective here is to focus upon communication with parents and the public, the subject of internal communication has been consciously omitted.

Particular thanks are extended to Gaston Dugas, Director of Public Relations for the Montreal Catholic School Commission, who offered helpful suggestions in the early stages of preparation of this booklet -- and to Winnipeg's Superintendent of Schools Carmen Moir, and Information Officer Garry Lahoda, who took the time to submit detailed comments on early drafts.

3 James Nuttall
March, 1971

The information gap

A serious information gap has been allowed to develop between the public and the schools of Canada. And in most provinces the results are beginning to become painfully evident.

In large part, current criticism of education stems directly from public concern over rapidly rising costs. Education is seen as something of an ingrown closed-shop, freely spending public money with little restraint or accountability.

But there is more to it than concern over mere money. There are other underlying factors -- nagging questions in the public mind -- which have surfaced as part of the current concern over spending. The schools of today bear little resemblance to those of 20 years ago, when the present middle-aged population was in school. The curriculum, the teaching methods and the facilities have changed drastically. Many citizens feel little sympathy with the new vocal demands of teachers, whom they see as well paid for nine months' work. Citizens are concerned that today's school discipline is not more as they remember it, and they wonder aloud why the schools have turned soft.

Many of these and other changes have occurred in the space of a very few years. During the 1960's, a decade when money for education seemed virtually limitless, school boards have gone ahead and instituted new programs and services, usually without the knowledge or understanding of most citizens.

But now, rather suddenly, has come a demand for accountability.

In this day of so-called participatory democracy, few aspects of society are escaping the wrath of articulate

critics; certainly education is not. Newspaper reports, magazine articles and radio and television programs raise increasing doubt about the schools -- about the quality of education, about the way public money is being spent, and even about the intentions and competence of the professional people working within the school system.

From all of this has emerged a clear need to open wide the channels of communication between the public and the schools.

Schools cannot continue to operate with maximum effectiveness if they do not have public respect, understanding, co-operation and support. Good community relations are becoming increasingly necessary if progress in education is to be continual.

If the average citizen does not have a reasonable knowledge of what the schools are doing and why -- and if he does not have confidence in the school system -- the board may suddenly find itself having to sacrifice and compromise because of aroused public opinion. Such opinion may indeed be based on public misunderstanding and ignorance, but that does not make it any less potent.

In the 1970's, school boards which are unwilling or unable to markedly improve communications with parents and the public are courting trouble and difficult times. At the very least, the public can become apathetic about the schools; at worst, it can become suspicious and discontented, even hostile. Even communities which place high value on education cannot be expected to support increased school spending indefinitely, without question.

What is a community relations program?

Most school boards today need a planned program to achieve a systematic two-way process of communication between the board (and the schools) and the public, for the purpose of encouraging public involvement and earning public understanding, acceptance and support.

It is apparent, however, that some administrators and trustees feel that such activity is unnecessary and outside the legitimate concern of educators. They look upon it as unrelated to the main task of educating children. They think of a contrived outpouring of propaganda and artificial image-building at public expense... and the whole idea seems rather distasteful.

Such views are not only unrealistic, but also reflect a basic misunderstanding of the term communication. It is not a matter of "salesmanship", nor Madison Avenue promotion or publicity, nor one-way propagandizing.

It is a matter of attempting to stimulate a better understanding of the role, objectives, accomplishments and needs of the schools... and, in so doing, attempting to create a climate in which the schools can continue to progress in directions beneficial to the pupils and the community, unimpeded by criticism and hostility based upon misunderstanding or ignorance of motives.

They need for a <u>planned</u> program is paramount -- a continuing program of low-key community information, rather than sporadic and disconnected public relations gestures proffered mainly in times of crisis. A public relations program should be designed to be informative and preventive, rather than remedial or problem-oriented.

There are many, many ways for a school board to establish and maintain open lines of communication with parents

and the public. Many are extremely simple and can be instituted with little expenditure of time or money. Some do require modest funds, but seldom are great amounts of money required to inaugurate a basic planned program of community information and public relations.

It is impossible here to list every possible media of communication -- every "public relations tool" -- available to schools and school boards. However, a very basic inventory of possible tangible considerations to be explored might look something like this:

-- Open-door policy and good liaison with the news media. A conscious effort on the part of school trustees and administrators to develop an open and easy relationship with reporters will often go a long way towards ensuring more objective coverage of education. "Public affairs" or open-line programs on radio and television, or newspaper columns on education, are worth investigating.

-- Public attendance and participation at board meetings. The fact that board meetings are open to the public is usually well-known, but more effort to publicize and encourage public attendance can lead to increased citizen interest.

-- Guidance to school principals. Individual schools are usually the main point of contact with parents. Boards can help principals develop closer relationships with their neighbourhood communities by providing guidance (and encouragement) on some of the techniques and approaches available to them.

-- Telephone information. For many people, the only contact they may have with a school board is by telephone. No medium of communication is misused more. A systematic

routine should be established for giving proper information over the telephone, in a courteous businesslike manner.

-- Publications. Publications of various sorts for parents and/or the public can be a valuable way to disseminate information about school board and school affairs; these can range from regular newsletters which report recent board decisions, to school newsletters, to special occasional leaflets or booklets on matters of specific interest or concern.

-- Speakers bureau. A good speaker is always in demand for service clubs, church groups, etc. A list of good speakers from the school system -- teachers, principals, trustees, administrators -- can be circulated to such groups, showing the specific topics on which each speaker is particularly qualified to speak.

-- Involving parents and the public. There is a variety of ways to capitalize upon community interest, and enlist the active support (even assistance) of citizens. Public meetings, seminars or workshops can be held, offering opportunities to discuss topics of current interest. School-community committees, comprised of students, school people and parents, can be invaluable. The use of teacher aides in the schools can do much to increase community understanding and support of the schools.

These can be some of the basic components in a structured program designed to improve community relations. The attitudes of citizens towards their schools are influenced by scores of factors which may favourably or unfavourably impress people when they come into contact with the school system at any level. No school or school board can possibly please all of the people all of the time -- there will always be critics -- but conscious effort to achieve meaningful two-way communication can do much to minimize criticism or hostility based upon misunderstanding or lack of information.

The board and its officials

There is no question that the success of any efforts to improve community relations is largely dependent upon the attitudes and actions of the school board trustees and their senior officials.

Good community relations are built largely upon the human factor. Successful two-way dialogue must have as its base a real desire on the part of the board to achieve such dialogue, and a belief that it is a public responsibility which can result in general benefit to the community and to the schools.

Without this kind of healthy outlook, neither trustees nor officials can set the tone that must permeate the school system if dialogue and rapport with the public is to be meaningful and effective. Those at the top of the system must reflect an honest desire to tell the education story, and then go about it in a willing and open fashion, not grudgingly or half-heartedly.

Nothing will fail faster than a superficial lip-service approach to communications -- a so-called public information program that is characterized by an outpouring of meaningless words, especially when it looks as if the board is trying to offset criticism or somehow trying to cover up the facts. Bland pronouncements, in whatever form they are made, are very much out of style these days... which is making life more difficult for governments, big business and, to be sure, school boards.

If trustees and officials cannot soon bring themselves to communicate comfortably and quite freely, in a spirit of open honesty and candour, it may be better to do nothing at all. Insincerity and superficiality are soon detected and may only make matters worse.

Trustees can play an extremely significant and effective role in explaining and interpreting the schools' strengths, weaknesses, accomplishments and needs to the public. Although political considerations sometimes strongly motivate their efforts to talk to reporters and community groups, this is not necessarily a negative factor; such motivation can serve well those who feel a responsibility to explain and interpret school activities and education policies to the citizens they represent.

On an operational plane, however, the success of a communications program lies largely with the board's chief administrative official: the superintendent of schools or director of education. His attitudes, his actions and his awareness of the benefits of communications are probably the most crucial factors in determining whether a school system's efforts to improve community relations are effective.

If the superintendent or director displays a willingness to engage in frank public discussion -- a real desire to keep citizens informed and to stimulate public interest and involvement -- the tone of his leadership is likely to carry over to others throughout the system, as well as to the public itself.

This is not to say that the senior official need necessarily be the chief spokesman or "front man" for the school system (although there is much to be said for that approach); rather, it means that he should take the leading role in motivating others within the school system to become more conscious of the need for two-way dialogue with the public. Good public relations is a family affair; it requires the full co-operation of all staff at all levels.

This is especially important with regard to princi-

pals and teachers. Parents of school-age children are more likely to have stronger feelings about their neighbourhood school than about the school system in general. Parents, after all, are concerned about their own children primarily, and it is the local school that becomes the focal point of their interest. To this extent, public relations in education begins largely in the school. Principals and teachers are vital public relations agents at the crucial grassroots level.

This being so, there is an obvious need for school boards to assist principals -- and, through them, teachers -- in becoming better attuned to the benefits and techniques of creating a healthy and live rapport with the local neighbourhoods they serve. Most principals do need encouragement and guidance in this area, and clearly it should be forthcoming from the central office staff.

At present, there is little such activity in Canada. In Metro Toronto, however, the Scarborough Board of Education held a one-day public relations workshop for all principals and senior administrative staff just prior to school opening last year. In large and small groups they discussed ways of improving communications in three general areas -- with the press, between schools and parents, and internally with students, staff and the senior administration.

There is a clear need for more programs like this, giving principals practical advice and suggestions which can be put to work at the school level.

The information officer

In most smaller school districts, trustees and the superintendent of schools can usually, themselves, do much to achieve good community relations simply by working with the local media and various community groups, and displaying an honest open-door attitude with the public. In small centres, there should be little difficulty in maintaining close rapport with the people of the community.

But in larger school districts, where the factor of size automatically makes people-to-people communication more difficult and the education system more remote from individual citizens, the need is for a structured communications program of substance and continuity. The larger the district, the more difficult it is for a board to maintain open lines of communication with the public without a planned program under the personal supervision of some designated individual.

Still, even today, there are not many Canadian school boards which have employed persons to devote full-time efforts to the information function. Those that have are primarily (but not exclusively) in the big cities, including Victoria, Vancouver, Edmonton, Calgary, Winnipeg, Toronto, Etobicoke, North York, Scarborough, Ottawa and Montreal. And there are a handful of others, primarily in recently-created amalgamated boards which suddenly have new communications problems with many more citizens.

Some of these school boards have restricted the scope of such full-time personnel to publication production, rather than allowing them the broader and more important scope of "community relations." A number of other boards have designated specific individuals to handle informational duties along with a variety of other responsibilities; in a number of cases, these persons carry the title of executive assistant to the superintendent or director of education.

Where full-time specialists have been employed, the usual pattern is a single information person plus secretarial assistance; Montreal Catholic (227,000 pupils) and Calgary, both of which have larger staffs, are exceptions.

Obviously, there are many larger school boards which still do not have community relations programs sufficiently formalized to the point of having at least the part-time services of a skilled person in charge. However, with the need for improved community relations becoming clearer in virtually every city, the trend is towards the employment of persons with at least part-time communications responsibilities.

Most of the full-time communications specialists presently employed by school boards in Canada have come from the news media, primarily newspapers. They carry a variety of titles -- information officer, director of public relations, or community relations officer, for example -- and most often they report directly to the senior board official.

Some school boards, when they discuss the possibility of hiring a full-time information officer, think in terms of publicity only, and hiring somebody who ostensibly has a way with words to write press releases and a newsletter or two. Such persons are often available for bargain salaries in the $8,000 range.

However, publicity is but one aspect of the concept of developing good community relations. Far better, it seems, to recognize the potentialities of a good communications person -- someone with appropriate experience and insight -- and to be willing to pay what is required to attract a good person. In larger cities, this usually means a salary of $11,000-$14,000 per year.

Properly employed, the information officer should

have full access to the inner planning circles of the board; he should be a member of the board's administrative cabinet, so to speak. If he does not have very close liaison with the inner circle, he simply cannot be expected to interpret board policy or action with finesse ... either in press releases, or in printed publications, or when caught off guard by a reporter.

Actually, to go further, the communications man should be looked upon as something of a consultant -- someone who is involved in the decision-making process, whose opinion and advice is sought when new policies are being formulated. This is very often the practice in big business, where the public relations executive may be able to advise on the likely public reaction to a new policy or decision; he may be able to suggest an approach to announcing it which will minimize the hazard of public misunderstanding or resistance.

This is not a propaganda function. It is simply based on the premise that a good idea badly presented can be rejected very easily.

In more specific terms, the duties and responsibilities of a full-time information officer usually include the following:

-- keeping informed about school system policies and practices by attending all board meetings and appropriate committee meetings.

-- working to achieve good liaison with reporters, and keeping the media informed of special events or new programs.

-- providing assistance to the director or superintendent and his staff in various activities designed to pro-

mote, internally and externally, a better understanding of the school system.

-- preparing all board publications, pamphlets, bulletins and brochures.

-- collecting and organizing information for officials and trustees as may be required for special occasions.

-- providing information requested by other school boards and agencies, answering questionnaires, and acting as host for visitors.

These are among the major day-to-day functions of the average school board information officer. In a few large centres -- Victoria and Montreal are prime examples -- a new dimension has been added; major new emphasis is being placed on efforts to involve parents and the public in the decision-making process, and it is the information officer who is responsible for devising appropriate activities to this end.

Another trend that is emerging: information officers are spending more and more time with principals, advising them on the benefits and intricacies of meaningful two-way dialogue with their neighbourhood communities.

Relations with the media

Coverage of education news by the mass media -- newspapers, radio and television -- is a source of considerable discouragement and frustration to many education people.

The complaints are always the same. The mass media overemphasize bad or sensational news. The media don't try very hard to make significant facts about education interesting. Insufficient attention is paid to education. Too much attention is paid to education. Reporters assigned to cover education are inexperienced. Statements are quoted out of context. The strengths of the schools are ignored. Reporters can't get the facts straight. And so on.

Some of these criticisms are very often true. But there is reason to suggest that the blame lies as much with school people as with the media.

The media usually say that school people are often evasive and defensive in interviews, when interviews are indeed arranged. They insist that educators have no idea of what news is, and in general they complain that it is difficult to establish real rapport with board officials.

These complaints are justified more often than not. Many senior board officials tend to distrust the media, sometimes with good reason, and just can't seem to bring themselves to an open and easy relationship with reporters.

There is no way to guarantee a "good press," if by that is meant a situation where the mass media regularly paint a rosy picture of educational policies, trends and activities. In realistic terms, a school board might consider that it enjoys a "good press" when education reporting is generally accurate and objective, giving a relatively balanced picture of the school system's accomplishments and difficulties, strengths and weaknesses. (Actually, by acknowledging that there

are difficulties and weaknesses, a board makes all of its actions and pronouncements more believeable; it is difficult to trust an institution that tries constantly to show how infallible it is).

No school board can realistically hope to guarantee a "good press," by whatever means. But there is little doubt that most boards could do a great deal to improve the quality of education reporting in their communities.

A "good press," quite simply, is built mainly upon good human relations - board people and the media (reporters and newsmen in particular) working together with a sense of mutual trust and responsibility. There is nothing mystical about it; the key is to build personal contacts with the media, working to improve liaison on a continual basis rather than on sporadic contacts when crises arise.

If it falls to the board to initiate and pursue such a relationship, so be it. But the barriers of unfamiliarity and distrust must be broken down, and replaced by open rapport and co-operation.

Of course, accessibility and close personal liaison will not guarantee that all education news that is published or broadcast will be entirely to the liking of the board. But it will at least go a long way towards minimizing blatantly inaccurate and irresponsible reporting, and usually result in better interpretive reporting that more adequately tells the school story to the public.

Principals and the media

The question of whether school principals should speak directly to reporters often causes more than a little hand-wringing. Although it is seldom a matter of policy, school boards generally seem to indicate to principals that it would be better if queries from reporters were referred to the board office. Most principals find this easy to accept, since they tend to be distrustful of the media in the first place.

However, in the interests of better communication, principals should be encouraged to speak freely with reporters when and if appropriate. If a principal can legitimately answer a specific query of a reporter, he should be allowed (even encouraged) to do so without fear of later reprimand.

If a reporter is seeking information or comment on some matter of board policy, for example, he is best referred to the board office. If, on the other hand, the matter concerns the principal's own school, he should generally be free to talk directly with the reporter.

* * *

Here is a hypothetical story told by Bob Blair, who is the Information Officer for the Scarborough Board of Education, to illustrate what can happen if principals are unwilling or unable to talk to the media in appropriate circumstances:

When a reporter calls a school, here's the way it usually goes.

Let's say I'm a reporter from the Metropolitan Star. It's eleven o'clock in the morning. My Editor rushes in and tells me there's been a call from a student at John Smith Collegiate. He says 1,200 of the 1,500 students have just

walked out because Principal Harry Jones won't let them smoke in the cafeteria. It's one hour before deadline for the night final edition, and my boss wants the story.

I call the school and say, "Could I speak to the Principal please?" The girl who answers the phone says, "Who's calling please?"

"It's Bill Johnson"
"Are you a parent?"
"No. I'm a reporter with the Metropolitan Star."
"One moment please".
There's a one minute wait, then another lady answers the phone.

"Principals' office."
"Is the principal in please?"
"Who's calling please?"
"Bill Johnson, Metropolitan Star"
"He's not in"
"Could I leave a message?"
"Yes, you may"
"I'd like to get his story on this morning's student walk-out, but I've only got 45 minutes till deadline. Could he call before then?"
"I'll see that he gets the message."

By this time five kids from John Smith Collegiate have arrived in my office. It's difficult to tell at first, but after the introductions I realize they are all boys, from 17 to 19 years of age.

They tell me what a louse the principal is, that he smokes in his office, the teachers all smoke in their staff room and in their dining room. They tell me at 18 they're old enough to go to war and pretty soon they'll be

able to vote at 18. They say the school has got hundreds of ridiculous regulations and that the students have no way at all to communicate with the staff and express their opinions.

After the kids leave it's ten to twelve and I try the principal again. This time he's in a meeting and can't be disturbed. I ask the secretary if there is a vice-principal or any other member of the staff that I could talk to about the walk-out, but it seems they're all in the same meeting. Then I ask to speak to the president of the students' council, but that's not allowed during school hours.

I want to keep my job, so I go ahead and write the story, based on what the five kids told me. I know the accuracy of their side should be checked out, but I have tried and nobody from the establishment wants to talk to me. Sounds like they really are guilty. Mind you, to be safe, I quote the kids on the walk-out figures and the rest of the information.

But the headline writer doesn't have to quote anybody. So the night final comes out with a banner headline reading "Twelve Hundred Smith Collegiate Students Walk Out Because Of Too Many Ridiculous Rules."

And before the newspaper is out, the same five kids have had a couple of radio interviews and probably been taped for the six o'clock local television news.

Long before evening the morning paper has picked up the story. But still no comment from the school administration.

About noon the next day, too late for the final edition, the calls start coming in -- a lot of them from the kids who didn't walk out -- nice kids who tell me a lot of

things, among them that there were only about 50 students who actually did leave the school, mostly for a lark and led by the five rabble rousers who did know something about a paper's deadline.

Then about two o'clock there's a call from the principal wanting to know how come a paper like the Metropolitan Star could employ a reporter who writes such inaccuracies and runs only one side of the story.

It seems there were only 50 kids who walked out, and 45 of them were back in class 15 minutes later. It also seems there is a committee of students and staff which meets regularly to discuss a variety of things which affect students -- like being able to go home or to a restaurant for lunch, type of dress to wear for school dances, length of hair, locations where students may spend study periods, and so on. There is no veto and each student member of the committee has one vote, just the same as the staff. Student smoking was to be on the agenda for the next meeting. The five ringleaders who walked out were known troublemakers and had no support from the vast majority of the student body.

So two days after the event, the full story can be told. But by this time it's old news. And I'm a human being, not happy with the brushoff I got yesterday and not pleased with the things the principal is calling me now. So I write two paragraphs which may or may not appear on page 87 in the classified ads section.

Some weeks later the same principal may call me to let me know about a special film-making project going on in the four-year Grade 11 course. An interesting feature, a nice story, but what do you think the chances are that I'll cover it?

Now wouldn't it have been much better if things had gone this way? I call the school and say "May I speak to the principal please?"

"One moment, sir, I'll put you through to his secretary"

"Principals' office, may I help you?"
"Could I speak to the principal please?"
"Yes sir"
Then the principal comes on and the conversation goes like this:
"Jones speaking"
"Mr. Jones, it's Bill Johnson from the Metropolitan Star"
"Yes, Mr. Johnson, I imagine you're calling about our little trouble this morning"
"That's right, could you tell me about it?"
"Well I don't have much information right now, but we're just starting a meeting to find out what did happen. When's your deadline and I'll call you back?"
"Twelve o'clock"
"I'll call you before then"

And he does call before twelve, and explains the whole story. It's still news, and the story still runs -- not under a banner headline, but buried in the back pages. And the school comes out very much on top.

* * *

The message behind this story applies not only to principals, of course, but to all persons in the school system.Reluctance to talk to reporters, especially when they call first, opens the doors wide to inaccurate stories based upon incomplete or false information.

Beyond the news

The mass media are largely unexploited by education for special purposes beyond the straight reporting of education news. Seldom do school boards take an aggressive approach to the media, offering suggestions for special education reports or regular features, and generally urging and pursuing more depth interpretive coverage of education affairs.

But opportunities do exist in virtually every community, if educators are willing to seek them out.

At a very basic level, a board should be quick to advise the media about new or novel educational projects in the schools. When significant new policies are adopted, why not urge the media to prepare interpretive analyses? At budget time, the public would surely be interested in an objective explanation of where the money is being spent (and particularly why costs are up). There are endless examples ... but the idea is that school boards should be quick to go to the media with specific suggestions when appropriate situations or specific story ideas present themselves.

The media, for their part, usually welcome this kind of approach. Their eyes and ears cannot be everywhere at once, and this kind of tip-off to interesting stories is usually appreciated.

There are other interesting opportunities for alert and aggressive school boards. With reference to the local newspaper, for example, why not a regular weekly column under the byline of the superintendent of schools, wherein he comments on some recent newsworthy developments or activities in the system? Or perhaps a weekly question-and-answer column in which some senior official answers specific queries from the public?

The broadcast media -- radio and television -- are

usually unexploited by school boards as communications tools, perhaps because they have something of a mystique about them which seems to set them apart from newspapers. Even the elementary "news conference," used extensively by other governmental bodies and agencies, is seldom considered by school officials.

However, for a number of reasons, the time is ripe for school boards to make themselves more familiar with the potentials of broadcast communications in their communities -- particularly for special purposes beyond the straight reporting of education news.

The growth of cable television in most parts of Canada, and the need for local programming, is creating many new opportunities for such local agencies as school boards. So too are the new regulations of the Canadian Radio and Television Commission (CRTC) which are requiring radio and television stations to significantly increase the Canadian content of their programming.

Both radio and television offer unique advantages over other media for certain special purposes. Not the least important is the fact that they tend to give a "personality" to those involved which cannot be matched in print. And their sense of immediacy often tends to hold one's attention better than the same content might in print.

School boards ought to seek out opportunities for educators to participate in local interview or panel type broadcasts, both on radio and television. In many centres, open-line programs, particularly on radio, offer unique opportunities for grassroots dialogue. Radio, too, is an ideal medium for a weekly "report to the people" interview show, with the superintendent of schools offering explanation and interpretation in response to questions.

Cable television seems especially worth exploring at this time. Although it is very much in its infancy, with minimum viewing audiences to date, the very idea of a small local television system geared to the needs and interests of a compact community demands recognition by those in education. Today most cable companies are searching for programming ideas and are more than receptive to suggestions and ideas from such community agencies as school boards.

Because of the focus of local interest, cable television is ready-made for education programs, from interviews with local educators to open-line programs to features on notable projects in the schools.

Involving the public in school affairs

Across Canada today, much is being said about the importance of giving citizens an opportunity to become involved in school affairs, and to have a voice in setting education policies. Generally, the idea is that, if the public feels a sense of involvement, much misunderstanding will be replaced by some rapport and co-operation.

Further, it is often suggested that citizens may well have some worthwhile views on education, and it is in everyone's best interests that these views are channelled through to those in positions of responsibility.

These are fine ideals. At least on the surface of it, the public appears to be seeking a greater voice in education affairs. And it would seem entirely logical that educators capitalize upon this to the full.

But these can be troublesome waters. There are some very understandable questions being asked by some educators. Is it just a very small minority which is demanding to be heard, or is there a genuine interest on the part of many? Will active involvement of a sizeable number of citizens result in anything more than a time-consuming nuisance factor, or can the schools really benefit from responsible lay participation and opinion? If there is a real desire for parents and others to get involved, why haven't home-and-school associations been more successful in this direction?

Ideals aside, in other words, is the effort worth the trouble?

It can be, yes. If the school board -- or much better, individual schools -- can develop meaningful and relevant activities to give citizens a real chance to get involved with the schools, the results can justify every expense, monetary and otherwise.

The word "involvement" is the key. It is one thing to run small newspaper notices to say that the public is invited to attend the board meeting next Tuesday. It is quite another thing to generate active person-to-person talk between interested citizens and school people. Efforts to give citizens a sense of involvement will be successful only if there is meaningful dialogue and participation; this is no place for token gestures on the part of school boards.

The board must convey to the public the idea that the opportunity for participation in school affairs is there for those who wish to take advantage. Then, having created this understanding, the important thing is to promote and encourage participation through whatever channels are open.

The trick is, of course, to develop and nourish appropriate mechanisms to permit two-way communication. There are many possibilities.

* * *

Canada's largest local school system, the Montreal Catholic School Commission has created a new mechanism which has already resulted in effective parental participation in school life.

The board now has School Consultative Committees operating in almost all of its 400-odd schools, designed to provide a means by which parents, teachers and principals can consult with each other before various decisions are made. Each committee has from seven to thirteen members, consisting of parents, teachers and the school principal, and meets at least once a month to discuss items relating to the operation of the specific school.

Each committee elects a president and a secretary,

plus any other officers they wish. The School Commission provides financial assistance to each Consultative Committee: 20 cents per pupil, with an annual minimum of $100 and a maximum of $350 per school.

* * *

In Victoria, the school board last year conceived a large-scale project that was unusually successful in improving communications between trustees, parents, students and administrators -- and, at the same time, in conveying to the public at large the clear message that the school board was honestly interested in the opinions and advice of individual citizens.

Amidst a great deal of supportive press coverage, the board sponsored a public examination of educational objectives in the coming decade. It was named Project Learning, and consisted of six study committees in different areas of the Victoria school district, each based at a senior high school. Each committee was composed of a trustee, a teacher, a principal, four to six citizens plus students, dropouts and recent high school graduates.

The assigned responsibility of each committee was to submit a report to the board outlining the group's opinions on the purposes of education. They were to describe what schools should be like five or ten years from now, and discuss any other matters considered important.

The committees spent the winter debating, studying and writing their reports. They were free to call in resource people, establish sub-committees or hold public meetings as they wished.

When the six committee reports were finally turned

in to the board (later to be consolidated into one major report), it was decided to publicize the ideas they contained immediately. This, it was felt, would increase the feeling of public participation and also provide feedback to school trustees on reaction to the proposals.

The idea of a conventional public meeting was rejected. Instead, what emerged was a 90-minute "public forum," via local cable television, which itself allowed for lively two-way dialogue between the public and Project Learning participants.

* * *

In Metro Toronto, the York Board of Education has successfully generated meaningful public dialogue this year through a series of six community meetings, one at each of its secondary schools. About 100 persons were invited to each meeting -- parents, teachers, students and a few board officials and trustees -- giving a cross-section of citizens in the area served by the secondary school and its neighbouring "feeder" elementary schools.

At each of the six meetings, the 100 participants were divided into four discussion groups. Their assignment was to discuss and determine answers to three questions:

(1) How do you see the role of the schools now, and in the future?
(2) What could the schools be doing more effectively than at present?
(3) Should parents and students be involved in educational decision-making?

After an hour of free and informal discussion, the four groups came together, each reporting their findings to

the meeting at large. The result: spirited discussion and a sense of real involvement for those in attendance.

* * *

Public forums are usually most effective when they appeal to local neighbourhood communities served by one or two schools; generally, the sharper the focus of interest the easier it is to engage parents and other citizens in meaningful dialogue. Although home and school groups have seemingly failed to capitalize on the built-in interest of parents, this is fertile ground for school principals who wish to strengthen school-community rapport.

An appealing variation of the "public meeting" approach is the "Talkabout Night" which can be initiated by any school. In general terms, the idea is to fill the school gymnasium with small groupings of tables and chairs; a sign on each table indicates the topic under discussion there, and a resource person (teachers, primarily) is on hand to answer questions. Parents are free to join any discussion group, and to move from table to table as they wish. The environment is relaxed and informal, allowing everyone an honest opportunity to take part.

A major key to the success of this and similar projects is the advance publicity it receives in the neighbourhood. Enthusiastically promoted and explained to parents, attendance should be good and participation extensive.

* * *

In Vancouver, the school board's volunteer teacher aide program has become something of a model in demonstrating an effective home-school-community partnership. This year there are more than 1,000 volunteers working in the city's

elementary schools; they help pupils with reading and arithmetic, they work in the school libraries, they accompany music classes, they assist in cooking and art rooms, they mark papers and read stories ... and in general provide practical help to teachers when and where needed. Each volunteer averages about three hours per week in the schools.

The volunteer aide program has done much to increase community understanding and support of the schools in Vancouver. It is looked upon as an ideal way to bring the community into the schools (and vice versa), even though the improvement of community relations is but a secondary objective of the program.

* * *

There are many ways in which meaningful lay discussion of education matters can be generated, and by which schools can convey to the public the idea that the <u>opportunity</u> for participation is there for those who wish to take advantage.

The common factors in most successful projects of this nature are (a) that the structure of discussion groups be such that each person has a chance to participate individually, if he so wishes, and (b) that the project is preceded and followed-up by sufficient publicity as to make the community quite aware that this opportunity is available to them.

Publications

Most Canadian school boards which are at all active in communicating with the public rely very heavily on printed publications of one sort or another. By far the most common vehicle is a relatively simple newsletter to parents, often delivered home via the children themselves. But there are many other examples, ranging from annual reports to booklets for parents of kindergarten children and many others.

There is some doubt whether the effort and expense that goes into many existing publications is justified. It is not that publications are not logical and highly-effective vehicles by which to communicate one-way with the public, for they can be indeed. The problem is, candidly, that few really do communicate adequately.

Sometimes they are produced by persons with little or no sensitivity or skill in written communications. Sometimes they have no clear-cut objectives which dictate the type of content and approach used. Either way, the result is less than effective communication.

There has been, it seems, a tendency for school boards to initiate publications of various sorts with little more than a vague notion that "we've got to communicate."

All school board publications are best when they are open and candid -- when they are written in an honest attempt to inform, rather than to serve as a mouthpiece of the board. Most parents have an inherent interest in what the schools are doing, and what current education practices and policies mean to their children. But most school board publications fail to capitalize on this.

Instead of being alive and fresh -- painting a picture of progress and imagination in the schools of the community or, when appropriate, spelling out difficulties

and problems -- board publications usually turn out to be dreary efforts, full of dull institutional jargon.

Often they seem to emphasize topics of least interest to parents, like frequent references to trustees and various administrative accomplishments, and such other things which hold little or no interest for anyone but those whose names are mentioned.

How much better are publications that emphasize students rather than the board and the administration ... that describe and explain new courses and programs ... that recognize the accomplishments of students and staff ... that interpret the results of experiments and innovations ... that explain the significance of major board policy decisions ... that talk candidly about accomplishments and disappointments, plans and difficulties.

It is not enough that publications look smart. These days they cannot get by on looks alone -- least of all, expensive-looking publications produced with public money by public agencies such as school boards. Above all, it is the content, and the way it is presented, that counts.

For this reason, the choice of the person to do publication writing is of some considerable importance. A real ability with words, perhaps a little flair, and an ability to objectively assess the needs and interests of the public, are key factors in determining how well a publication actually communicates with its would-be readers.

It is quite reasonable, if not even logical, to go outside of the central office in pursuit of such a person -- into the schools for a talented principal or teacher, or even beyond for a responsible freelance writer. A person outside the board office can potentially give publications a freshness

and objectivity which a central staff member would be hard put to duplicate.

Visual and design attributes of publications cannot be discounted altogether, but they actually matter less than most people suspect; certainly they matter less than the content. The "right format" is a nebulous thing indeed; a glossy "professional" production does not necessarily get better readership than a well-done mimeographed effort. Given a simple and attractive format, the key factors are (a) content which is of interest to the particular audience, and (b) a clear and interesting writing style.

Among the more common publications presently produced by school boards in Canada are these:

Newsletter for parents

In recent years, a good number of boards have jumped on the newsletter bandwagon. Today there are dozens of board-produced newsletters distributed by the thousands to parents in centres all across Canada.

Well-done centrally-produced board newsletters, with the specific objective of reporting board decisions and policies -- offering the interpretation and rationale that so often is lacking in the mass media -- can serve an extremely valuable purpose in keeping parents and the public informed. But it is essential to remember that such newsletters are presumably sent to all parents in the community, and therefore the content should be of widespread general interest and importance.

Some board-produced newsletters wander from this purpose. They include items that are really of interest to parents with children in one particular school. They lapse

into editorializing on administratrivia or other insignificant topics which hardly justify publication of a newsletter.

System-wide parent newsletters definitely can have a place in an overall communication program, provided they are written with the objective of providing relevant and interesting information to parents throughout the community.

School newsletters

Parents are primarily interested in those things which affect their own children's education -- decisions, policies, trends and activities which relate to their own children.

Modest newsletters issued by individual schools have a greater chance of capitalizing upon this interest than any centrally-produced newsletter intended for all parents throughout the school system. Potentially, they can speak to parents in a more personal and meaningful way, simply because their focus of interest is more specific and well-defined.

Many principals need encouragement and guidance in launching and maintaining a regular school newsletter, for this is often foreign ground. Such aid must be forthcoming from the board -- from some designated official, or from the information officer if the position exists, or from some skilled outside advisor -- in the form of tips on format, content and production.

A central person can provide pre-written news items of equal interest to all parents in the community, which can be inserted in a school's newsletter at the principal's discretion. Ideas can be given for additional items in each issue, beyond the obvious items on each school's own activities.

There is nothing new about the school newsletter idea. Some who are looking for remarkable new ways to communicate with parents may feel that it is not sufficiently novel in this new world.

But it is a fac. that the school newsletter is a vehicle that is still largely unrefined, and holds great potential in stepping up school/parent dialogue.

Annual reports

Most Canadian school boards produce an annual report of some description; some are modest mimeographed booklets, and others are glossy and expensive documents that sometimes win awards in design competitions.

The annual report can be a live document of wide general interest ... and as such, a first-class vehicle by which to interpret the school story to many people in the community. It can be a sort of play-by-play account of what the schools are doing and why, highlighting the most significant events of the year, along with the necessary statistical and financial information in interpretive and understandable terms.

Few annual reports, however, seem produced with these objectives in mind. Few give the impression that they are written for parents or the public, but rather, perhaps, for the trustees, or the mayor, or the president of the Rotary Club, or the school superintendent in some other city. Few, indeed, are given widespread distribution to parents.

A number of school boards in Canada's west have shifted their annual reports to a tabloid newspaper format. In several cases this cheaper format has permitted production of enough copies for distribution to all homes in the

community while holding costs to previous levels.

* * *

Many school boards also find themselves involved in producing various occasional publications or pamphlets from time to time, designed to fulfill some specific needs. A pamphlet or booklet containing information for parents of kindergarten children, for example, is frequently prepared. Some boards produce modest "factsheets" about themselves, giving statistics and financial information plus answers to commonly-asked questions. Folders describing evening programs are common.

There are many examples.

It is a common tendency, it seems, to look upon printed publications, especially newsletters, as a panacea for communications problems. This is far too strong a mandate.

Good publications <u>can</u> help alleviate specific communications problems. They must certainly be considered an integral part of any communications program. But it is unrealistic to believe that some newsletters to parents can convince the public that everything in education is as good as it could be.

There is a real and interesting story to tell about education, not only to parents but also to the taxpaying public. Greater effort should be put into telling that story well, through publications and in a variety of other ways.

37